

Review Article

An Appraisal of Okwula Festival in Biraidu District of Dekina Local Government Area, 1939-2020

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How to cite this article:

Alhaji O M. An Appraisal of Okwula Festival in Biraidu District of Dekina Local Government Area, 1939-2020. *J Adv Res Humani Social Sci* 2024; 11(2): 14-18.

Date of Submission: 2024-11-02

Date of Acceptance: 2024-12-05

A B S T R A C T

The Okwula festival is an important part of the cultural heritage of the people of the Biraidu district of Kogi State, north-central Nigeria. The annual re-enactment of this festival serves as an opportunity for members of the community, especially sons and daughters of the area in the Diaspora, to reunite and re-enact family bonds, to learn new skills (traditional skills), and to celebrate the unity of the people. The celebration of the Okwula festival involves a number of activities, including offering sacrifices to the ancestors, performing music and dance, displaying traditional crafts, and merrymaking. This paper examines the significance of the Okwula festival to the people of the Biraidu district from 1939 to 2020. The study revealed that, in addition to its cultural importance, the festival equally enhances social bonds among the consanguineous and intergroup relations with their neighbours as well as providing economic incentives for the people. However, the advent of Islam and Christianity in the area, especially from 1939 onwards, became an existential threat to the performance of this rich cultural heritage. The paper concludes that, despite the overwhelming influence and threat from Islam and Christianity, the celebration of the Okwula festival continues to maintain its core rituals, uniqueness, and values. In addition, contrary to the Eurocentric perception of Africa as a dark continent of pagans, it was revealed that Biraidu people and indeed African peoples are religious people whose references for the supreme deity (God) are found in the various names they call Him.

Keywords: Okwula Festival, Biraidu district, Appraisal, Islam and Christianity.

Introduction

The term Okwula signifies two things among the people of Biraidu district; first, it means a carnival marked by merry-making and procession to celebrate the reunion between the living and the dead, and secondly, it means an encircled venue where all rituals and sacrifices to commemorate the celebration of this reunion are performed. It should be

noted that the Biraidu people and Igala people in general believe in life after death and the continuous interaction between the living and the dead, especially through the reincarnated spirit of the dead called Egwu. This belief is central to Igala traditional religion. However, it does not mean that Igala people do not believe in and worship the highest God of heaven, called Ojochamachala.

An Appraisal of Okwula Festival in Biraidu District of Dekina Local Government Area, 1939-2020 To the people of Biraidu, one of ways they worship or communicate Ojochamachala is through their ancestors who sometime appear bodily in form of masquerades or what Miach called the incarnate beings and sometimes invisible to them. Literally speaking Okwula festival communicates the relationship between the living and the dead. While Egwu-Afia (the incarnate being) is seen as the visible feature of the dead visiting the living, Okwula festival serves as the means of perpetuating the communication between the living and the dead, re-enactment of family bonds and appeasement for the ancestors as well as a way of worshiping Ojochamachl. This festival comes up once every year between the months of March and April. During this period, the spirit of the ancestors which monitor and ensure the well-being, prosperity and productivity of the living are collectively invoked through rituals and sacrifices performed in Okwula. The annual performance of this rich cultural heritage of the people is not only helping to preserve the culture and tradition of the people, but also enhance social bonds among the living as well as increasing the volume of trade in the area, which translates into improving standard of living of the people of the area. There is no doubt that, since the contact of the people with the outside world, Islam, Christianity and western civilization, this contact has greatly influenced and still influences the performance of the festival. However, despite the overwhelming influence of western civilization and foreign religions, some core rituals of the festival have remained unchanged.^{1, 2} Historical Background There is no specific date with respect to when Okwula cultural festival began, given the fact that the founders of this aged-long cultural practice were oriented in oral history. However, according to Ocholi Etu, The festival started at a time when calamities ranging from mysterious illnesses to death of children and old, bareness and poor yield of crops, inadequate rainfall that resulted in drought befell the land. These calamitous events were considered a bad omen for which the elders of the land went into oracular consultation with the diviners (Ama'abifa) seeking to know the rationale behind the problems. The diviners told them that, their ancestors were not happy with their attitude of total abandonment of the ancestors. He went further to say that, the diviners told them to go and appease their ancestors with sacrifices of cock, and locally brewed wine, (Obulukutu).

This view was corroborated by Shaibu Odawn when he said; one certain evening the elders gathered at the village square where they usually had their Obulukutu (locally brewed wine) when a man appeared in their midst and asked them for a drink that he was thirsty. They ignored him and continued enjoying their wine, until the man got angry and disappeared from their midst. The disappearance

of this man the informant said marked the beginning of bad omen in the land. As a result of these happenings, the elders went into oracular consultation with Ama'abifa as it is being practiced today. At the end, it was revealed to them that the man who came to them to ask for a drink some time ago was actually from the land of the dead. Asking for water to drink signified that, your ancestors are thirsty and hungry over there in the land of the dead, and your refusal to offer the man water to drink was what angered your ancestors, who invoke their wrath upon your land. According to him, the diviner told them that, the only solution to their problem is appeasement, "go and appease your ancestor". The diviner therefore gave them a list of items for the appeasement or sacrifices as follows: locally brewed wine (obulikutu), cock, cola-nut, water, ichekelemi (well oiled beneseed or corn suop) and pounded yam.^{3, 4} Consequent upon this instruction, the elders met and a date was set for the sacrifice, where everybody especially those whose fathers are no more alive would bring all the items of sacrifice as prescribed by the diviners to the village square, Okwula for the appeasement. The sacrifice was successful and their land was cleansed. From that time onward, the people have always re-enacted and celebrated it. It became a celebration probably because their land was healed and they started enjoying bumper harvest. The Egwu-afia that the celebration revolves around represents and is seen as the ancestors. Responses gathered from the respondents above point to one fact, and that is, this annual festival started as a response to the calamities that beset their land and appreciation for the ancestors for revealing the cause(s) of the misfortunes and redeemed their land. However, studies in science and scientific knowledge have disproved this type of assumption and belief and have shown for example that, those misfortunes were perhaps, natural occurrences which may not have anything to do with the ancestors. For instance, studies have shown that, sickle cell anaemia in children is usually a result of mismatch in marriage between "AS" husband and "AS" wife or "SS" husband and "SS" wife. Talking about bareness in the land, if the ancestors did not have barren women in their midst, how come they have the name AGAJI (agaji is an Igala word for barren or bareness) to describe a woman who could not conceive and have a child or children in Igala language? This means that, people of older generation also experienced bareness during their time on earth.^{5, 6}

According to P.E. Okwoli, Igala people first came in contact with Islam through Hausa- Muslim traders who came all the way from kano and gobir to trade in the markets around the Niger/Benue confluence, which brought together Hausa, Borno/Arab, Yoruba Nupe Idoma and Igala traders. He further asserted that, the Jukun contact with the Hausa states in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Borno in the 16th and 17th centuries and the Fulani Jihad of the

19 century were the main causes of the spread of Islam along the Niger-Benue basin. It should however be noted that, early Muslim traders and Islamic missionaries in the area did not outrightly condemn the traditional religion of the people rather, they allowed or permitted a mixture of Islamic faith with the worship of God through the various deities that they were used to. This could explain why the people (Biraidu people) were comfortable with them. But the entrance of the 19th century Muslim scholars or reformers brought significant change to this admixture of the traditional religious practice among the people and the Islamic religion. By 1939, the Christian missionary activities in the area began to yield fruits with the conversion of the following persons as the first set of people to embrace the Christian faith or religion. They are: late pa Silas Isah Etu, late pa Jacob Ogidi Akubo and late pa Daniel Oneh Ocheja. From that time onward, activities of these two Abrahamic religions had continued to impact negatively on the ancient practice of Okwula in Biraidu. Through their teaching and preaching, these missionaries (both Christians and Muslims) had made concerted efforts to subvert the practice of Okwula festival and replace it with Islam and Christianity, thereby relegating not only the religious practices among the people but also, subjecting the entire cultural practices of the people to European cultural hegemony. According to Ogechukwu C. et'al, this seeming dominance of Western culture is evident in the language they speak as well as in aspects of dress, cuisine, music, dance, and religious beliefs.^{7,8}

Impact of Okwula Cultural Festival on Biraidu District

Right from the inception of the Okwula festival, it has impacted the lives of the people of Biraidu and elsewhere in Igalaland. The impacts are economic as well as social and spiritual. It is important to note that, despite the overbearing influence of globalization on the cultural heritage of the people of Africa and Biraidu people in particular, the importance of Okwula cultural festival among the people of Biraidu and elsewhere in Igalaland cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, evaluating the impacts of Okwula festival on social and economic lives of the people of Biraidu and Igalaland is necessary for an understanding of the need to encourage the continuation and not allowing this rich cultural heritage to be pushed into extinction in modern times.

Economic Impact

Economically, the celebration of Okwula festival means a lot to the people. The festival serves as sources of revenue for the people. A lot of money is realized from donations and good will extended to the land by some invited guests and sons and daughters from Diaspora. Rental business ventures, during this period, usually make lots of profit

from their services. For instance, Canopies and chairs were rented and mounted at the various compounds on that day in the village, Cloth dealers were also given the contract of providing the clothing materials called Ukpo-Iyaye (uniform attires) needed for the festival. Craft men and women were also contracted. The people, especially those that are into trading, used this period of the year to maximize profits in their businesses, because prices of goods like yam, palm oil, goats, guinea-corn, maize, millet, cola-nut and cock will skyrocket. The festival season does not only open up commercial activities with the neighbouring villages but also increase the volume of trade in the area as people from the neighbouring villages and towns come to buy and sell thereby inject more money into the economy of Biraidu.^{9,10}

The festival also draws people from all walks of life that come to enjoy the various cultural displays like cultural music and dance during the festive celebration for leisure helps to boost the economy of the local people and provide temporary employment to the local residents. For example, people from Anyigba, Iyale Egume, Ejule and so on usually come to be part of the celebration. And when they come they buy drinks (beers and other soft drinks) from the locals and sometimes they come with their own items of trade which they also sell during the festival.

This high inflow of tourists into the communities during the festival period contributes immensely to the economic empowerment of the people especially food vendors, okada riders and taxi drivers. For instance, according to Labran, a taxi driver who narrated the story of how much he makes every day on ordinary day and how much he makes during the festival shows a significant increase in his incomes a result of the Okwula Festival.

Socio-Cultural Impact

The celebration of Okwula cultural festival is a home call for sons and daughters of Biraidu and their friends from far and near to witness the occasion. They come to commune with family members whom they have not seen for a long time and re-enact family bonds.

The festival creates opportunities for visitors from far and near who come to socialize with the people of Biraidu, allow them to make new friends and establish new relationships which sometimes may lead to intermarriages between the people of Biraidu and their neighbours. It therefore enhances inter-group relations. It is important to note that, this interaction offers the visitors the ample opportunity to have deeper understanding of the people's culture, and taboos to the points that when they become married to either the sons or daughters of the land, they freely live among the people. For instance one of my respondents, Pa Shaibu Odawn of Ojukpo Ajikpiti who got married to late Mrs. Ache Shaibu Nee Omale of the Ejigbo

Olijo clan is from a neighbouring village of Udane-biomi said he married his wife through Igala people in general his regular participation of this festival. According to him, it was during one of the Okwula celebrations he met his wife. And ever since their marriage he has lived all his life in his in-law's place at Ojukpo Ajikpiti. For over 40 years now I have stood for my wife in presenting her items of sacrifice because she is the only child of her parents. There are many like Pa Shaibu in Biraidu who got married as a result of their participation in Okwula festival and have also relocated to the community

Apart from the social interactions between and among the people, the festival also provides opportunity for the acquisition of new clothes and new shoes for both male and female, and old and young people in the area. The festival equally showcases the sanitary awareness of the people. This is shown in the way they keep their surroundings, streets and roads cleansed especially as they await their august visitors (ancestors). They equally keep themselves clean and appear in their best dress for the occasion. In addition, the festival creates opportunities for the young ones to hear and learn philosophical sayings, folklores, and riddles which are parts of traditional or non-formal education.

Culturally, the annual re-enactment of this rich cultural festival has equally helped to preserve the cultural heritage of the people. For instance, the advent of Christianity and Islam in the 19th century have greatly influenced and still influence the performance of Okwula festival in Biraidu and elsewhere in Igalaland. Hence, converts or adherents of the two foreign religions began to develop a negative attitude towards the performance of Okwula festival because, to them, it is for pagans who do not believe in the God of heaven. According to Ocholi Etuh, "there is nothing pagan about one remembering one's departed father". Idowu in Ati 1987 told a story of an "Englishman who went to place a wreath on the tomb of a deceased relative... the English man characteristically asked a Chinese friend, when is your relative going to eat the rice that you are offering?. To which the Chinese promptly replied, when yours smells your flowers" remembering one's departed loved ones is not paganism as the whites wanted us to believe. The advent of Christianity and Islam in Biraidu has made a lot of sons and daughters of the clan to avoid participating in the festival. However, this has not completely changed the thinking of the people towards Okwula festival as some people are putting serious efforts to ensure they preserve this rich cultural festival.

Okwula festival helps to prevent greediness and gluttony among the people. For example, it is a taboo for any participant to eat carelessly within the grove where the sacrifices are performed. Among the igala people it is forbidden for

two men to sleep with one woman, and when this happens the two men become enemies. In fact, it is said that, if one of them falls sick the other person is supposed to visit him on the sick bed for if he does, that sickness will surely kill the person and he too will die. For this reason, nothing can bring them together again in this life or the hereafter. After both men had died and reincarnated, it became a taboo to bring them together and sacrifice to them. This explains why on the day of Okwula sacrifices, different families have their spots where they do their sacrifices within the grove.

Because the current generation may not know whether such a thing has happened between their ancestors, they keep warning people, especially the strangers from other lands not to eat from one spot to another. This will help to avoid the wrath of the gods. From the foregoing we learnt that; a cultural taboos that prevent people from eating anyhow and from place to place within the premises help to prevent gluttony and greediness.^{11,12}

Conclusion

So far this paper has been able to give an overview of the Okwula Cultural performances and its economic and socio-cultural implications for the people of Biraidu and its environs. It was revealed that, contrary to the Eurocentric propaganda against the traditional religious belief of the people which states that, the people only acknowledge the supreme being in heaven but, neither fear, serve nor worship Him, the people's faith in the most high God and their reverence for Him can be found in the various names they call Him. Names like, Ojochamachala- the creator that created Himself, Ojo odob'Ogagwu-the last man standing, Ojo Odu Am'Onu- the Lord of Kings. It should be stressed here that, even though the people belief in numinous, life after death and continuous communication between them and the highest God through their ancestral spirit in the form of incarnate beings (Egwu-Afia), fairies (Ichekpa), and other objects of worship, it does not negate their faith and reverence for the most high God. It is made clear in this paper that the people of Biraidu are not worshipers of the reincarnated spirits of their ancestors and other objects of worship mentioned above as erroneously conceived by those foreigners who introduced Christianity and Islam to the people. Rather, they employ those items as media or channels to give them some kind of concrete reality of their religious belief. It is equally revealed that globalization through Christianity and Islam has impacted the performance of this rich cultural heritage of the people. The impact is both positive and negative. Finally, those who do not know but are willing to learn and know should realize that the people of Biraidu are religious people and the focus of their religious belief is God almighty in heaven and not those deities that are channels of communication between them and the most high God. Those

channels only give them a semblance of concrete features of their religion.

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